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1 message

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For campaign signs, it's the last roundup
Beginning next year, state overrules municipalities' time limits on
signs, placards

Paul Green By J. Malcolm Garcia and Ken Manson, Special to the Chicago Tribune
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Over the next six days, campaign signs likely will be as ubiquitous as
political ads and robocalls, as those stumping for candidates and
causes make their final pushes before Election Day on Tuesday.

After the votes are tallied, though, most of the signs will come down
as quickly as they've cropped up, because many suburbs require
political signs to be removed within a week of an election.

But that soon will change.

In June, Gov. Pat Quinn signed a law that, beginning next year, will
allow property owners to leave political yard signs up as long as they
choose and will bar municipalities from legislating time limits.

Not everyone is thrilled with that.

"I think it's hard enough to put up with signs for 60 days or 30
days," said village Trustee Karen Mills of Hoffman Estates.
"Unfortunately, they pollute the area, and people don't collect them
right away."

Proponents say the law will bring the state into compliance with
several court rulings, including a 1994 U.S. Supreme Court decision
that found that outdoor political signs are free speech protected by
the First Amendment.

That decision followed a ruling against the Missouri community of
Ladue, which accused a resident of illegally posting a sign in her
yard opposing the 1990 Gulf War.

Illinois' law will nullify ordinances in many municipalities that
prohibit political signs from being posted until 60 days to 30 days
before an election.

"The opportunity to place a sign in a yard and say what you think
about a particular political issue is one of the most important forms
of political expression we can have in our society," said Ed Yohnka,
director of communications and public policy for the Chicago office of
the ACLU, which backs the change in Illinois law.

Ordinances limiting the amount of time a political yard sign could stand put "unnatural" limits for individuals to express their points of view, he said. He cited the recent health care debate as an example of an issue that did not conform to typical election cycles.

"That debate went on for over a year," Yohnka said. "It simply is not part of our politics that all of our political speech takes place within an election calendar. The new law identifies that need to speak out on a continuous, ongoing basis."

Though some Illinois municipal leaders are unhappy about the law, they're glad they can still mandate the size of signs on private property.

In Rolling Meadows, for example, political or campaign signs cannot exceed 12 square feet.

In Hoffman Estates, where signs have to come down within 72 hours of polls' closing, the size limit is about 9 square feet.

"We don't want a neighborhood with 100-foot signs. Property maintenance would be an issue," said Don Plass, Hoffman Estates' director of code enforcement.

The state law doesn't address one of the frequently ignored regulations governing the use of political signs: They're not allowed to be posted on public property, including any street corner or right-of-way along between a road and a sidewalk.

"Every year, we go out and come back with our trucks filled with signs that were illegally posted," said Ginny Cotugno, Rolling Meadows deputy clerk.

Last year, Hoffman Estates collected 1,345 illegally placed signs that promoted a range of things, from political candidacies to garage sales, said David Banaszynski, village environmental health officer.

In Palatine, officials two years ago contemplated but then rejected a ban on political signs. The village now sends notices to candidates and political parties, reminding them of restrictions.

But local officials acknowledged enforcement is difficult. Campaigns often plead ignorance or blame an enthusiastic if uninformed follower. Those fined for having outsize signs in their yards often claim someone planted them without the property owners' consent.

Municipal officials are looking at whether the state law will restrict their power to legislate what residents do on their property.

"Everyone is entitled to freedom of speech," said Paul Green, a code enforcement officer for Antioch, "but you can't have 50 signs on your property without creating an eyesore. Any questions that come up, we will review as they come in."

In Antioch, another type of grass roots political speech came under the spotlight last summer. Teens campaigning door to door were told by a police officer they needed a permit.

That incident led to the demotion of then-police Chief James Foerster.

Green said that Antioch, like many suburbs, requires a permit for door-to-door soliciting but not for campaigning.

"Solicitors are trying to sell something. Canvassers are just trying to get out the vote," Green said.

As for campaign signs, many suburban leaders said they don't want to see even their own signs posted after Election Day. Libertyville Mayor Terry Wepler said his signs were being taken down after April's elections, even as he awaited word on whether he had won.

"I think people will be disappointed when they see signs up 12 months a year," Wepler said.

But, he added, "Municipalities can only do what the state tells them to do. The state does things municipalities don't like."

Freelance reporter Jeff Borgardt contributed to this report.

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